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U.S. Tracks Cuban Aid To Grenada

In '81, Senate Unit Nixed CIA Plan To Destabilize Isle

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The Reagan administration, concerned that Cuba is developing better ways to extend its military influence in Central America, considered a covert intelligence operation against the leftist government of Grenada in 1981 and is now closely monitoring new Cuban activities on the tiny eastern Caribbean island.

The details of the operation are not known beyond a general description from knowledgeable sources that the CIA developed plans in the summer of 1981 to cause economic difficulty for Grenada in hopes of undermining the political control of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. But these sources said the operation was scrubbed because the Senate Intelligence Committee opposed it.

One senior Republican on the committee said in an interview last year, "Yes, there was an operation, and we all thought, unanimously I believe, that it was just a small island and so the Cubans or the communists control it, so what?"

The intelligence scrutiny of Grenada and rhetorical blasts against Bishop's government from the Reagan administration represent one side of a government debate over what, if any, danger exists for the United States or other Caribbean nations from Grenada's growing military ties with Cuba.

One of the strongest arguments that a threat exists was offered last week by Nestor D. Sanchez, deputy

assistant secretary of defense for inter-American affairs. In a speech to Florida Republicans, Sanchez disclosed that the Cubans had built a battalion-size military camp on Grenada that could supplement air and naval facilities under construction for possible military use.

Using harsh tones that have characterized earlier statements on Grenada by President Reagan and his principal advisers, Sanchez said the island had become a "virtual surrogate" of Cuba. He said the camp "includes barracks, administration buildings, vehicle storage sheds, support buildings and a training area with a Soviet-style obstacle course."

Cubans advisers and laborers are also building runways and port facilities in Grenada. "The Cubans are constructing air and naval facilities there that far exceed the requirements of that tiny island," Sanchez said.

A former CIA intelligence officer in the region, Sanchez also said Soviet military exports to Cuba in 1982 were a record \$1 billion compared with \$600 million in 1981 deliveries. Shipments included "Turya" hydrofoil torpedo boats, Sanchez said, MI24 "Hind" assault helicopters and an additional squadron of supersonic MiG23 fighter aircraft in an air force of 200 modern planes.

Sanchez's remarks reflect the frustration among many conservatives in the administration over the growing military strength of Cuba and its relatively unchallenged support for leftist governments and insurgent movements in places such as Grenada, Nicaragua and El Salvador.

But, while intelligence concerns over Grenada remain high, many officials in Congress and elsewhere believe Reagan and his policy advisers have consistently exaggerated the threat posed by the tourist-dependent nation of 110,000 people.

During Alexander M. Haig Jr.'s tenure as secretary of state, there was talk of "going to the source," meaning Cuba, to stop the flow of arms through Nicaragua to guerrillas in El Salvador.

In November, 1981, the National Security Council authorized specific paramilitary actions against the Cuban presence in the region. "In some circumstances, CIA might (possibly using U.S. personnel) take unilateral paramilitary action against special Cuban targets," according to NSC minutes.

he has pursued a close alliance with Cuba's Fidel Castro.

CIA officials presented the covert action plan to the Senate Intelligence Committee in July, 1981. Because of what were perceived as unusual and unspecified components, it met strong opposition.

Sources said Lloyd Bentsen (D-Tex.) reacted to the CIA presentation by saying, "You've got to be kidding." Committee Chairman Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) reportedly suggested that the CIA officials reconsider the proposal.

A senior committee member said the proposed operation did not include any plan to overthrow Bishop. "We are out of the business of overthrowing governments," he said. "We may cause a little economic trouble, a little publicity and [give] aid [to opposition groups], but we don't overthrow governments."

Another member of the committee suggested that in using the word "destabilize" in reference to the remarks of the senior Republican member, "you should go with the description that it was economic destabilization affecting the political viability of the government."

Covert operations against Grenada were first discussed in the Carter administration after the new Bishop government supported the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and openly solicited economic aid from Cuba. But after reviewing options, according to current and former administration officials, President Carter rejected all but propaganda measures.

The strong rhetoric continued into 1982. During his working vacation last summer in Barbados, Grenada's neighbor, Reagan said, "El Salvador isn't the only country that's being threatened with Marxism." Grenada, Reagan continued, "bears the Soviet and Cuban trademark, which means it will attempt to spread